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History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
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Steve Hagemoser, Age 40+, Des Moines, Iowa
Mary Clarke
Iowa Department for the blind
524 Fourth St., Des Moines, IA 50309
3/18/2011

Mary Clarke: My name is Mary Clarke. I am interviewing Steve Hagemoser today at the Iowa Department for the Blind, 524 Fourth St., Des Moines, IA, 50309. The date is

March 18, 2011. Steve, do I have your permission to conduct this oral interview?

Steve Hagemoser: Yes, ma'am.

Clarke: All right. I understand, Steve, that you were a student in the Orientation Center in 1991. Is that correct?

Hagemoser: Yep.

Clarke: And, at that time I was a teacher in the Orientation Center. So, that is how I have known Steve. When you came into the Orientation Center, what brought you to make that decision?

Hagemoser: That's a very good question, and when I've talked to other blind people, I've heard other blind people have similar experiences. But, I have to admit I didn't come to the Orientation Center gleefully. I came into the Orientation Center when I was 23, and that was after I'd gone to Iowa State and earned my Bachelor's Degree in Psychology. My Counselor, Voc. Rehab. Counselor, here at the Department and several other people who work here had suggested to me that maybe it might be good to go through the Orientation Center immediately after high school. And, in looking back on it, that probably would have been a wise decision. But, also looking back on it emotionally at that point, I just wasn't ready to deal with it. At that point, I pretty much said no. And, looking back on it, quite honestly, being around blind people kind of gave me the creeps, which is an interesting psychology of all that in terms of, to a certain extent, if you see in other people something that you

don't like about yourself, that makes it doubly uncomfortable to be around those people. So, I resisted going into the Orientation Center, pretty much avoided it like the plague, so to speak. And, it was only after years and years of more kind of banging my head against a wall and more frustration, and more just generally kind of getting down on life that I eventually decided to, with considerable reservations, go through the Orientation Center.

Clarke: When you say, "getting down on life," what do you mean by that?

Hagemoser: You know, I've talked to other blind people that have, that seem to share similar views is that, for me, I started getting to a point where, although I wasn't at the point where I was thinking literally self-destructive thoughts. I was getting to the point that where, I use to put it one way type…I'm not sure about this whole life thing. Maybe life really isn't cut out for me. It doesn't seem like the options…the terrain seems pretty…I guess you might say that it seemed like there was a cloud just about all my horizon, pretty gray, and pretty unfortunate. I'm sorry, just pretty, just things were very pessimistic. And, I thought, well, blindness I guess I could say, at that point I would have said, I think that blindness has ruined my life up to this point. It's ruining my life presently, as far as I can tell, and as far as I can see, it seems like it will continue to ruin my life in the future. So, I came into the Orientation Center not so much excited about this wonderful new opportunity, dah-ta-dah-ta-dah, but really thinking I don't know where else to go. If this doesn't work, I'm going to be pretty much up the proverbial creek. I didn't know exactly what I would do. So,

I guess if you will, I came into the Orientation Center after everything else really hadn't worked, and it was kind of, this was the last viable option.

Looking back on it now, I'm eternally grateful that I pulled my head out of a certain place long enough to make the decision to come in here. And, this reminds me, in terms of the Orientation Center, I didn't come in in a very good frame of mind. And, I have to admit I was probably more depressed a month after I got here than I was at the beginning. And, some people ask me, well why on earth would that be? And, looking back on it, I think by the time I'd been here for about a month, I started thinking. Okay, I have different choices or different attitudes I can take when it comes to blindness. I could say, well, blindness is something that stinks; it's ruining my life, which is what got me into the Orientation Center. And, by the time I'd been in the Orientation Center for a few weeks, through my observations, this is how the wheels were clicking in my head. I was just saying, oh, okay, so this is the option. Instead of thinking that blindness sucks, and I'm going to go eat worms kind of deal.

Instead, based on what I'm observing from this place, it's like, it was my perception at the time, like place your head firmly up a certain place and say, well, blindness is wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, rah, rah, rah, isn't this wonderful. If you will, but, pardon me, as a psychologist, pardon the fancy-schmancy term, but they talk about Reaction Formation. The idea is if you're uncomfortable with a certain emotion, become hyper the opposite. So, if you will, at the time I didn't have the terminology, but still I'd have got level, felt that way, the way that people are dealing with blindness is basically, in my opinion, having a

simplistic, overly positive, isn't this wonderful sense of everything's rosy. Isn't this wonderful, blindness-blindness, boy I wish everybody could go have this wonderful experience kind of thing.

And, I think where it hit its peak, or you might say where I hit my depth, is I was talking to some Orientation Center students who were a little bit younger than me. I think they were about 18 or 19 years old and I was 23 at the time. And, we were talking in the Rec. Room; you know, just about 30 feet away from where we are at this moment out in the Rec. Room. And, the topic came up, well if the genie came out of the bottle and just magically could grant you a wish, if you just magically would snap your fingers and have your sight back, would you do it? And, the people I was talking to were saying something to the effect of, well I've gotten so comfortable with myself as a blind person, or I'm so comfortable with this that I wouldn't take it. I would decline that. And, I think it's safe to say that I hit the roof. I remember for the next few minutes, and I look back on it and smile, and say hopefully I wasn't being abusive, but I know I was saying a lot of words that I shall not repeat here, kind of deal. Essentially, my memory is that I was literally just stomping around the Rec. Room, just about shouting profanity at the top of my lungs. Just probably about the most angry maybe I've ever been in my entire life, fuming, steaming, four letter word chorus, just spewing forth from my mouth; just furious.

And, now, looking back on it, it's like, well, intense anger, where was that coming from. Well, as a psychologist, one of the things is that anger and anxiety, or anger and fear, are oftentimes flip sides of the same coin. That, if something frightens you, then in a lot of ways, you may get

angry as a way of, or as a means, of coping with that. So, looking back on it, I think what really pushed that extremely hot button as I see it now, was the fear that, okay, I have two choices in life: I can be miserable about blindness, which is what got me in here. Or I can place my head firmly up the "bunghole" and live in denial, in effect, lie to myself. So, at that point, when I heard other blind people say they're so comfortable with being blind that they would literally and politely decline the magic genie, who could give them their sight back, my thought was, okay, I guess it was fear, in a way. I was terrified. I felt that my options were: Go back to being miserable, which I didn't want, which is kind of what got me in here. Or just flat out lie to myself. Be in complete denial. And, I thought if those are my two options, being miserable or lie to myself, then I really am screwed.

Now, I think...I look back on it, I think that's what really touched a nerve and evoked such an angry response was because, looking back on it, I was probably terrified of being miserable or being clueless. You know, although that was a very powerfully unpleasant, emotional experience, through staying at the Department, if you will. I said I was more depressed a month after I got here than I was when I arrived. And, I think what it ends up being is that although I still, to this day, think that if a blind person says if a genie came out of the bottle and offered me sight. I'm still, you know, just to put it mildly skeptical, but at the same time, I think going through the Department helped me realize, well, how many people would say that life dealt them a royal flush? I mean, that everything that life threw at them was exactly what they wanted and they feel that they've been given everything and more. And, the answer is basically nobody. That everybody has things in their life that have

been handed to them that they wouldn't have asked for. And, to me I think that's kind of a perspective thing. It's not that blindness is preferable to being sighted, in that almost if we would pick it. Pardon me if this sounds opinionated, but I still think that anybody who says that they would pick blindness over being sighted, it's, I don't know if you're lying or stupid or whatever, but it's just ludicrous.

But, to me it's the idea, like, say money. It's like when you're talking about blind or sighted, it's like, well, all things being equal, would you rather pick a job that pays you $70,000 a year or one that pays you $60,000 a year. For somebody to pick the one that offers you $60,000 a year, all other things being equal, it's like, well, what on earth are you talking about? But, at the same time, staying with that as an analogy, does that mean that somebody who gets paid $60,000 a year is doomed for a life of torment and misery and just playing a harmonica in a corner or something like that, and just saying I'm going to wait to die kind of thing. Well, no. I mean, I just think that blindness is not an option that any sane person would request.

But, one of the things that's nice about the Department is, and I do realize this now, is that the real limits…the real barriers to where I was going for are really more, much more about my personal beliefs, attitudes and perceptions and different things, which I guess, if you will. So, at the end of it, I started more and more buying into the Departmental philosophy that what's really going on. If you're miserable about being blind, it isn't the loss of vision, but rather what does this mean to you? And, in fact, I was just thinking as a Psychologist, there's a form of therapy that, I don't know if Jernigan and the people that sort of developed the original philosophy of the blindness that has been sort of the

cornerstone of the Department for the Blind; I don't know if they ever even had heard of this gentleman.

But, there's a guy in Psychology named Albert Ellis, who developed what he called Rational Emotive therapy. And, the main crux of Rational Emotive therapy is that the emotional misery that people experience is really not so much from what happens to them, but rather the beliefs and interpretations, if you will; how they interpret what has happened to them, or what they make of what has happened to them. So, anybody who might be listening to this in the future would say, "Jeez! That sounds like the Department's philosophy about blindness; that it's not so much the physical loss of vision that's really the problem, but the misinformation and misconceptions, the implications of what does blindness mean." And, that's what gets blind people depressed and makes sighted people uncomfortable, is that sense. There are some very close parallels there, whether it's Albert Ellis's Rational Emotive therapy or the Department's philosophy about blindness; is the "objective" really of your visual loss, is really not so much the issue as is, well, what are you telling yourself about it, and what this all means.

Clarke: I was thinking, when you were talking about that, I was thinking about Jim Witte, who was Director of Orientation at the time. Was he Director when you were a student?

Hagemoser: Yep.

Clarke: And, the same for me, and he would always make that statement that if you were…all things being equal and

you were given the opportunity to have your sight back, there's something wrong with you if you don't choose to have your sight back.

Hagemoser: I hadn't heard him say that, but I guess when I think about it…he was one…Now that I think about it, Witte if you ever listen to this, I guess you're not a complete SOB; so, anyway. No, but actually, now that I think about it, as you mention that, he was one of the people I approached and I guess gave me a lot of counseling, because I was very upset after the incident that I told you about a few minutes ago; when I hit the roof and started cursing at the top of my lungs because of the other students were saying, well, they're so comfortable with being blind that they wouldn't have their sight back, if they had the option. And, my memory of what Jim Witte said was something to the effect, of what you just said now, Mary. Is that, you know, there's a positive attitude, and there's just plain being silly or something like that.

Clarke: Right.

Hagemoser: And so, the idea that somehow if you had the choice, but somehow you would choose blind over sighted it's silly. And, he mentioned, I remember, some successful blind people that he knew and still knows, at the time that his guess is that from time to time, they wish that there are, if you will, times when vision comes in handy. And, to not have it, I guess to a certain extent it might be again like a bigger salary.

15:00

Hagemoser: All other things being equal, would you rather get more money or less money for the same job? To say that I'd rather get less money, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. But, if you're getting paid less money for your salary, does that mean your condemned to this life of, like, well, I'm just going to put on my sunglasses and play the harmonica and play the blues; put out a coffee can and hope somebody drops a few coins in there and dah-ta-ah-ta-dah. So, actually, Jim Witte helped me emotionally process some of that, and I guess that was part of what was able for me to sort of straighten that out. Because, I would have gone to Witte or some other staff member and if they would have, for all practical purposes, backed up what those other students were saying. That's like, well gee, Steve, what are you talking about. Well, yeah, I mean they're comfortable with their blindness, and they're so comfortable that they wouldn't get their sight back if it was offered to them.

If Witte would have said something to the effect that, I think they're totally right, I would have kind of smiled to myself, because to me it would have seemed like one of those alien movies that you see on TV from time to time, where the aliens have invaded and you're the last human being who's not an alien; that fear that gets played on in those movies it's sort of like, resistance is futile, prepared to be a simulated kind of deal. It's like I would have felt that, okay, the aliens have conquered and they have won and I guess I'm screwed, because I'm the last person on this planet who has a clue, and nobody else does. So, I don't get this image of Witte with like a little antenna or something like that, but…yeah, you mention Jim Witte being that…because he was the business class instructor. And,

I'm sure many people have been interviewed via these recordings are certainly going to talk about business class.

And, when I think about it, I'll briefly talk about business classes. Some things that I heard in business class have forever changed my life positively. And, other things that I heard in business class, quite frankly, I thought at the time were a load of crap, and still do. And so, now that I think about it, you might say the business class offers, if you will, a smorgasbord of potential different ideas and different perspectives and different ways to look at it. And, some of them are, you know, taste like my mom's lasagna, and other perspectives are going to seem like Brussels' sprouts, you know, and hot mustard or something like this; anything you don't like.

Clarke: I'm curious because you finished…you had your Bachelor's degree when you came in as a student, right?

Hagemoser: Yep.

Clarke: What was your major?

Hagemoser: Psychology.

Clarke: Psychology was your major. So, you had an idea at that time of what you wanted to do?

Hagemoser: Sort of. That's interesting. At first, when I got to Iowa State, I liked psychology and I thought about philosophy and psychology. But, at the time when I was a freshman in college, when people were saying, well, you need to know that if you want to do anything with

psychology that a Bachelor's degree just isn't going to be enough. You're going to have to have, at least, a Master's if not a Doctorate. So, as somebody who is a freshman in college, the idea of thinking, oh my God, instead of four to five years, we're talking about maybe ten or twelve years to be able to be a psychologist. That kind of threw me. So, for a couple, a year or two I major in business. And, as I was taking psychology classes and business classes, then I just realized that, well, even if psychology is less marketable than business, it does seem to be the classes that I'm more interested in. And, it's the classes where I feel more comfortable, and just feel like I fit in better; there just seems to be more interest.

So, I decided…I changed my major to psychology the last year at Iowa State, and I have to admit that my vocational goals at that point weren't really very clear. In fact, when I applied for graduate school, I guess, when I think about it, it was still the same deal. I applied almost all for terminal Master's programs, because the idea being that even after I had left undergrad and I was going into the Center between my Bachelor's and Master's degree programs, I still at that point, I still wasn't at a point where I felt I could really commit to wanting to do a Doctorate. I mean like counseling or clinical psychology field. So, after I got done, I pursued a Master's degree in counseling psychology from The University of Nebraska at Lincoln. And, now that I look back on it, prior to coming into the Center, I never carried my cane; wouldn't be caught dead with my cane, like I'm sure a lot of other people. I struggled with that you have to carry your cane everywhere you go when you're in the Orientation Center.

And, I will admit that the first couple of months when I got home, back to Ames where my folks lived, and still live, my cane would lean up against the wall in the foyer of their house, and it wouldn't move until I had to come back to the Department. So, if I left Des Moines on a Friday afternoon and got back to my parents house, my cane would lean up against a corner and I would go out and hang out with my friends or do whatever. But, no way would I bring my cane along with me. And, then when I had to go back, like I say, either Sunday night or Monday morning, then I would grab my cane; as I knew there would be hell to pay if I didn't have it when I came back to the Orientation Center.

And, when I then started going for my Master's degree at Lincoln, I actually then moved to Lincoln in August of 1991, after I left the Orientation Center, and that's when, I'm sorry. When I moved to Lincoln I started my program, then I carried my cane with me all the time. And so, if you will, the people I met in Lincoln, that's how they knew me. I started my identity, or whatever, with people there. And, then certainly when I went to The University of Kentucky for my Doctorate, and on and on now. So, I guess that was the transition. I hadn't really thought about this until you asked me questions, Mary, but now that I think about it, yeah. The transitioning to identifying yourself as a blind person with people that you've known all along, like, maybe, say people from your hometown; now that I think about it, is way more challenging than if you didn't know the people from Adam or Eve, and you're just meeting them. Well, there's no transition there. You meet them as a blind person, and either they accept you or they don't accept you; that's it.

And, I guess I'd never even thought about it that much, but it's kind of fascinating, is that the people who already

knew you as a "sighted," or at least trying to pretend that you're a sighted person, being visually impaired, but not at least the blind "the b-word." Making that social adjustment was much more anxiety-arousing that once, sorry I'm breaking into psychologist mode. Where, now, I'm thinking aloud here that confounds the variable, where, well, when I was trying to introduce my, or trying to re-orient myself to the people I knew before I went to the Center, I was doing that when I wasn't so comfortable about being blind. When I then moved to Lincoln, and then from that point on, it got to the point where I was okay with being blind; then I was okay. So, occupational hazard of thinking aloud, was it the fact that knowing the people was really the issue? Or was the real issue, well, how comfortable was I as a blind person?

Clarke: When you were going to Iowa State, did you have readers or did you have…

Hagemoser: That's interesting. Now, thinking about people who would be going to school now with so many things with the Internet, is that probably it would be a lot different. But, back in my day, sort of like an old-timer, and I suppose a lot of other people my age, is that, yeah, I had a lot of readers. And, I noticed that the further along I went in school, the more I needed readers to read for me as opposed to having books on tape. And, that's not just because there was more reading in graduate school than there was as an undergrad. That was part of it, too. But, you know, psych 101 books, introductory psychology books, I would feel quite confident that they were going to be very heavily available on some type of audio format. They were back when I was in school,

back when I went to college in the mid-80s they were. Because I think all of my introductory and my basic psychology textbooks, almost all of them were on tape. So, I could listen to the tape and I didn't really need to hire a reader so much. I used readers for taking tests, but for the most part, that's a major chunk of what I had readers for.

Before the Internet and online databases, when I went to The University of Kentucky; when I would take classes, like each class would have at least one if not two or three Sears catalog-sized packets of journal articles that needed to be read. As an undergrad, you pretty much had textbooks, and you would read a chapter and then you would go take the tests with a lecture. In graduate school, they would have, you know, photocopies of all these different types of articles. So, I used a lot more readers when I was in graduate school. And, at that point, they started to have some standard technology there so I could use that a little bit. But, I think I used readers much more heavily in graduate school than I did as an undergrad. I think it was just because what was the probability you were going to get this available on tape and journal articles were almost never available on tape. Where as now, as I said, if I were to start graduate school, now, almost every article that I read in graduate school, some of the classic psychology articles that were written for a professional audience. When I think about it, almost all of them would be fairly easily brought up on a database, and you'd just have JAWS read you your articles.

Although, one interesting thing; when it comes to technology, in the mid-90s, from what I've gathered, in the mid-90's blind people collectively sort of drove into the ditch for a little bit when Windows first started coming out.

Because, with the transition from DOS to Windows, blind people were sort of forgotten initially in that one, and there was a lot of stress for people. When sighted people went to Windows lock, stock, and barrel, and they really didn't have good access in the mid-90s, with it being sort of a technology dark zone for blind people. But, certainly since the late 90s, and for the most part, now, the gap between sighted access and blind access seems like it's narrowing; although, it's still significant in a lot of areas. Like, I say, cell phone usage and operating home appliances, and things like that. I guess I veered off of your question a bit, but yeah, back at Iowa State I did have readers a lot. My memory is that most of my books were on tape and most of what I had readers for was for taking tests.

Clarke: Did you…I ask this question because when I was going to college I did not have the blind techniques that I have now. And, I went through a lot of stress thinking about finding my classrooms and that kind of thing. Did you go through any of that?

Hagemoser: Yeah, I think…yeah, now that I think about it. I guess, one thing that I would almost always do, and pretty safe to say always, is that when I found out what class I was going to take, I wanted to find out where that class was and what building, what room. Because, in terms of dealing with the stress in addition to all the other things about starting a new class and different things like that, whether it was self-conscious about asking people for help that day. I'm sorry; the first day of class I didn't want that. So, I think that's probably a habit I've picked up to date, because I just got back from a conference, a professional conference in

Australia. And, the day before the actual conference started, when I got to the hotel, I went up to the floor where all the meeting rooms are, and I systematically walked around and got asked about, oh 30 or 40 times by nice people, "Sir, are you lost, can I help you?" And, I said, "No thanks, fine, I'm just exploring, and pardon me if I'm making you nervous or whatever," but. I just had to go around and felt around for the Braille labels, and sometimes the numbers on the classrooms were large enough that I could see them. But, anyway, I guess that's a habit I picked up that I keep to this day.

It's like, well, if there's going to be a conference I want to do, I guess what you'd say, blind person recon before actually doing the thing. Because, I guess it's not a bad thing. I do still feel somewhat self-conscious about asking people. That's an uncomfortable feeling when you don't really know where you're at and where you're trying to go. So, I suppose like a lot of things in life, a little bit of knowledge eases some of that stress. When you think about it, I guess sighted people would do that in different ways. They wouldn't so much need to do that, but I suppose you could say, blind or sighted, trying to find out about a new environment before you find yourself thrown into that new environment is probably pretty rational stress management type thing for most people.

Clarke: I was going to say, a pretty reasonable thing to do. In going on that subject, you know, you said that people would approach you and ask are you lost or whatever; that kind of gets into the social type issues. Do you have any insight, you know, in what is kind of a healthy way of communicating with people who may not necessarily have,

may not necessarily have an idea of how to deal with blindness, you know.

Hagemoser: I was thinking, an example of probably almost every blind person probably has dealt with to a greater or lesser extent, sort of a classic example of, like say, you're in a grocery store and a little kid comes up to you, or runs up to you, and asks you a question or says what's that or what's that for? And, then a somewhat horrified parent then comes up very quickly and whisks the child away or scolds or rebukes the child; different things like that. It's happened to me a number of times, just as I'm sure it's happened to a number of blind people. I was in a Hy-Vee, and a kid, a little boy probably about fourish years old, came up to me. And, he ran up to me and grabbed my cane and just started shaking it and giggling.

30:00

Hagemoser: Which caused me to laugh because it was sort of, like, even by kids standards, that was an unusual kind of thing. But, he just, I don't know, just thought this is kind of a toy. And, his mom then came around the corner, and the poor woman just about dropped something in the frozen food isle. And, I could hear an audible shriek or gasp come from her, and she ran over and said, "Oh Timmy. Oh sir, I'm so terribly sorry." She was scolding and rebuking the child, and yanking the child away. And, in that moment, thinking about sort of a time freeze, there is a point where that conversation or that interaction could go one of two ways, or I guess a variety of ways. But, the two main ways is I feared is that, okay, this is a potentially awkward situation.

The mom is freaked out about the idea that her child has just grabbed a blind person's cane, and so now, if I am upset or angry or embarrassed, or if I appear upset or angry or embarrassed, and that mother takes the child away from that situation; and probably the way the conversation would go out is the mother would probably yank the child away, and sort of angrily be holding the child very close to her, then talking to him in a very stern tone of voice. The child wouldn't know what was going on, but the child probably would, at some level, pardon me, occupational hazard.

A psychologist thing is that different ways that people learn: There's the one system of learning where we think where we went to school and we went, okay, George Washington is the first President and 2 plus 2 equals 4; this is kind of formal structured classroom learning. But, then there's other learning that you might call more social learning that goes on at a more primitive level, and I've shared this with some of the vets that I work with. It's like, I want to say a one-year-old, or a 12-month-old or an 18-month-old toddler; that toddler may not have even developed the words mama and dada, but has that little bugger figured out who's gonna be a softy who'll give him a cookie before dinner and who's gonna be hard and say no you can't have a cookie before you have your vegetables? And, the vets will laugh and say, "Yer darn tootin' they do."

So, it's that idea that kids and just human beings, from a very little age, before they even have the verbal capacity to learn anything, are they stupid? No. Their little toddler wheels inside their own little toddler heads are definitely clicking, and so they're figuring out their social environment. Who's gonna be a softy, who's gonna let me have a cookie? You know, can I get away with it around this person? So,

using that as an analogy, the kid is not going to be able to verbally articulate what's going on, but there's definitely some social learning that's going on in that kid's head. And, essentially what's going to happen is the kid is going to pick up on I don't know what "that" was, being the white cane. I don't know what "that" was, but whatever "that" was really freaked out mom and really upset mom, and I got scolded. And, the kid, if you will, is going to associate the white cane with some very uncomfortable feelings, and feeling like they did something wrong; that they maybe shamed or embarrassed their parents, that if you will, thinking about, you know, the idea, like, say the dog with the tail between the legs.

To a certain extent, that kid may be feeling the four-year-old's equivalent of having his tail between his legs, and feeling like I really did something bad. Mom really scolded me, mommy's really upset with me, which I think anyone can probably safely say whether they're a parent or looking back to their own childhood, is an extremely uncomfortable kind of feeling. So, if you will, that white cane has been associated with that uncomfortable feeling. So, although then the kid may never carry a conscious recollection of that with him, the kid consciously may have long since forgotten about that. But, I believe as a psychologist, that at some level the next time that kid encounters a white cane there's going to be a similar emotional energy that's going to be going on.

In fact, it's kind of interesting. I have to admit I hadn't even thought about it specifically in these terms, but I work with veterans who have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. And, we use a classic experiment in psychology about fear conditioning. It's called the Little Albert Story, and it's

interesting. It's about a little white rat, and I made the connection that the white cane and the white rat. But, essentially what they did, for those people listening might be horrified about what I'm about to say. This was back in the good old days, back in the early 1900's, when you could scar people for life in the name of science and not have to worry about ethics, and all that kind of stuff. The good old days, back when you could pretty much do whatever you wanted to with impunity. But, what they had was a toddler and his name was Albert, and he was probably about 18 months old, give or take. At first, they introduced a little white rat to Albert, and Albert giggled and would reach out to pet the rat, and he sort of was delighted to see the rat. He thought the rat was a positive curiosity. So, what the experimenters did is they established right from the get-go that Albert has no hard-wired fear of rats. And so, then what they did from that point forward is then when Albert would be doing what he was doing, if the white rat would be introduced, if the white rat would come up, somebody would stand behind him and hit, if my memory is, I think it was like sort of just about the equivalent of a gong, like, maybe a hammer against a piece of metal or something. I think if you had a ball-peen hammer and you hit a frying pan or something very loud, and that sudden loud noise, you think will how did Little Albert react? And, you would imagine that a sudden loud noise is going to be, what you would call, an unconditioned stimulus; for any kid that's going to be very noxious, and the kid would scream and cry because it would frighten him. So, white rat, bong, whaaa. And then, later on, the white rat comes into view, bong right behind his head, and whaaa.

And, I'll ask people…I use the story with the vets, "And, what do you think eventually happened." And, generally, the guys almost have got to say, "Well, I don't know, but I suppose at some point he started shrieking and crying when he just saw the rat." I tell'em, "Exactly; that's what happened. That was a conditioned fear response." And, you know, I'm chuckling to myself because before just right now it never made the connection. The white cane, I mean, white rat. That to a certain extent that thing I was talking about with the child is that the white cane wasn't what was causing that very unpleasant emotional reaction with the deal, but to the extent that the white cane, white rat is paired. So, in staying with this analogy, the boy's mom freaking out and kind of scolding the child and grabbing the child and whisking the child away, and sort of angrily and very abruptly saying, "You don't do that, you don't do that." That's going to be like the gong for the kid, you know. Kids, I believe, are hard-wired to be afraid of what their parents fear. Hence, I think anybody who probably has parents who are really terrified of a tornado probably can attest to that. There's a certain amount of fear contagion that goes on, because if the adults around you are freaking out because a tornado is coming, then the kid is going to pick that up. They don't have to…they don't need a separate lesson plan, you know, to learn that.

So, going back to the story; if I wouldn't have said anything when the kid, if you will, was whisked away by his parents, I imagine what the conversation would have went. Is the kid would have been very upset, frightened, might have had his tail between his legs, and the conversation on the way home would have went something to the effect of, you know, "But, mommy why?" "You just don't do that, you

don't do that, that's inappropriate. You shouldn't do that." And so, the parent is trying to teach the kid a lesson, but emotionally, probably, what the kid has picked up on is again, the white cane is something bad. It's something to be feared and something to be avoided. But, and I hope I did this, I don't know if I did this. But, at the time, I went out of my way to try to engage the mom in a brief conversation. And, I said something to the effect of, "Well, first of all I want to thank you for not grabbing the kid and yanking him away," even though inside my own head I knew damn well that that's what she probably would have done if she could have. So, she was so socially ensnared in a trap where she realized at this point that she probably had to interact with me; otherwise, it would have been perceived as rude. And, maybe I'm just wishful thinking here, but I think from her reaction. And, then as I started to engage her I did a very brief, not as long-winded as what you've just been subjected to, but did a very brief description to her.

It's like, well yeah, if you would have yanked the kid away, then I think the kid would have been frightened of blind people. And, I don't think that would have been so good. So, with the kid there and the mom there, I thanked the mom for not whisking the kid away. And, I just very briefly explained, it's like, to the little guy, Timmy or whatever, I said, "Well, this is my cane and this is what I use to see." And so, I quickly demonstrate, I maybe poke this out here to find like a curb or something like that. And so, then actually, in front of me, then the little boy and his mom are actually having sort of a conversation. It's a three-way conversation, where the mom can say, "Well yeah, that's what he uses to find things when he can't see. Then that's how he uses it to find…" So, in that moment, then, I've

created hopefully the mom and the kid see that as a learning opportunity; as something that they've learned that they've shared together. And, then my hope was, who knows if this was in reality. But, my hope was then that the conversation, then, on the way home, instead of being, "Just don't do that." And, you know, the kid, you know just about crying kind of deal, feeling like they did something wrong. Then, hopefully, would be more of a positive emotional tinge to it; and essentially would be just like anything. Like, a kid learns about butterflies, or a kid learns about, you know, the planets, or whatever; the kid learns about cats, or the kid learns about horses or something. It's the kid discovering his world and learning about it. And, it becomes you might say, a positive learning context.

Clarke: I understand what you're saying about the informal education. I think it's so, so important that we take advantage of opportunities as they arise. Now, tell me a little bit, what if on our part we don't have a good attitude, then what happens?

Hagemoser: Oh, that's another good question. As you ask that question, I guess I'm reminded of a little anecdote. When I was back in college at Iowa State, it had something to do with disability, an office for students with disabilities. And, again, this is just going on my perceptions, as I met a person who was not totally quadriplegic, but functionally quadriplegic, and I've met other folks, who are I guess somewhere between a paraplegic and a quadriplegic, I don't know what the technical term is. But, it's pretty much that with their legs, for all practical purposes, they have no use of. And, they have partial use of their arms based on the

location of the injury. So, this gentleman had partial use of his arms. Yeah, I think that was it; partial use of his arms and then no use of his legs. And, my experience of it at that time was that it seemed like there was an aura or an energy of agitation and negativity that came off of him; that he wasn't rude to me. He was polite, but it seemed like the energy that came off of him was frustrated, was upset, was negative, was unhappy. And, I remember my emotional reaction, was wow, this is really aversive. And, I'd kind of like to leave this room as quickly as I can, and I guess I felt kind of guilty about it. Well, wait a minute, this poor guy's been through enough and now here you are, just here you are. Well, I feel uncomfortable, I want to leave.

And, I think it's one of those experiences, I guess like a lot of experiences in life. It may be uncomfortable at the time, but to the extent it's learning, because afterwards; now I can look back on it and think, oh my goodness. That might have been a pretty good parallel with what other people felt like when they were around me for years and years. The idea that when somebody has a disability, and it's pretty obvious that their attitude about it is negative and they're unhappy, that they're uncomfortable, that they wish that it wouldn't be the case. And, a few of the negative vibes comes off of them. It's, I guess, it's the social equivalent of garlic to a vampire, meaning, that it's going to be a repellent; is that one of the things I firmly believe as a psychologist, and just as a person, is that when it comes to relationships as we interact with other people, essentially it's not so much what other people do or don't do that makes that person either attractive or not so attractive. It's really an emotional barometer; is that if you feel good around somebody you're gonna want to spend time with somebody.

If you feel gooky around somebody, you're not gonna want to spend time around somebody.

And so, looking back on that I realize I was in a room with a guy, who as far as I could perceive, was very uncomfortable with his disability, or at least he was frustrated. Who knows, maybe he was just having a bad day. Maybe, you know, on another day I would have talked to him and he might have had a lot more positive energy going on. But, how I interpreted as, was like uff, this is uncomfortable. So, if you don't have that positive type of energy, and again, I guess, kind of like going back to if that story I was telling you about before. If the little boy who approached a blind man who had a cane who was a lot more uncomfortable, a lot more angry, a lot more agitated, and just negative. My hunch is the experience probably would have been that type of deal, where the parent would have been mortified, the kid would have been scolded, and the only thing that would have happened is the kid would have learned, well, stay away from that, and that's very uncomfortable. And, I'm smiling to myself as we're talking about social things. And, I want to say that lately to anybody that's listening to this. That lately in my love life, there's been some frustrations, because it seems like I've met some young ladies who I liked, and for whatever reason, just, I guess, such is life, they just didn't return the attraction.

45:00

Hagemoser: So, I don't want to come off as bitter about the whole thing. But, I have heard, speaking of social things, and the dating thing, is that sometimes that does happen.

Where as much as I can try to be positive about it, sometimes people just are uncomfortable around it and that's an obstacle they can't overcome. And, that's one of those deals where I guess you can't control how other people feel; that's just a given. And, if you're negative, that may be a problem. Even if you're positive that, you know, some people may not be able to get beyond that.

I remember talking to a young lady and, I guess, I had seen her picture on the Internet, and she had seen my picture on the Internet. So, at least I passed the, you know, slightly better looking than a mud fence kind of test, or something. And, we had talked about that, and it seemed like the conversation was going pretty well. And, I mentioned to her, well, I hope this doesn't throw you, but I'm blind. And, over the phone her tone shifted. And, although it was kind of hurtful at the time, because it was pretty much the beginning of the end of what really hadn't started as a relationship; looking back on it, I can find a little bit of humor in it. And, it's sort of like, well, for all practical purposes, I may have been better off to say I just talked to my lawyer and he says that parole looks pretty promising this next time. The idea of being a convicted felon who is just about getting out of prison, that I might have gotten a better dating reaction than the idea of being blind. And, I've learned that, well, there's definitely…it's not everybody, but a significant percentage of people where just going along where I say well I'm blind, then I may as well have told them that I'm about to make parole. And so, that's very uncomfortable and unfortunate. And, I guess, that's just the frustration, in that sometimes that's going to happen, and it's disappointing. But, at the same time, I guess, what all really can you do?

I guess, relatedly, whether it's dating or whether it's job interviewing; there's a parallel process that's there. Now, I don't try to get a good night kiss from a person I may do a job interview with, but to the extent that both interpersonal interactions that are going to involve some type of evaluation, two-way evaluation. You know, when you're dating, like it or not, and I guess you could say that's bad. But, that's just admitting life; when you're on a date you're on a two-way evaluation, and when you're in a job interview, you're on a two-way evaluation. So, there is a parallel there, and, I guess, all you can do is try to put people at ease. And, if you convey a positive energy, then you at least increase the chances that you'll be able to win that person over.

But, if I may borrow from a baseball analogy; you think about strikes and striking out, is that if you are as a blind person, just that in itself from a social standpoint, depending on who the person is, that maybe one strike, two strikes or three strikes against you. And so, if you're negative on top of that, then that's going to be an extra strike, and you may be out. But, I guess in staying with that, if blindness itself already is one or two social strikes against you, then if you're negative about it, and you have the negative, uncomfortable energy, that's going to be your third strike. And, then that's out as far as the relationship goes. I suppose staying with that baseball analogy, then I guess you also as a blind person have to realize that for some people, that I guess that's true to say, for some people as a blind person that's three strikes and you're out. And, they may be able to maintain some polite civility and just sort of smile and nod. But, to a certain extent, there's going to be some people that the minute they hear you're blind, no matter how positive you are, they're going to be heading for the door.

Now that I think about it, I guess that's probably good to keep in mind, because I know I've experienced this sometimes; where I've felt kind of hurt. And, it was only after time that I realized just for whatever reason, is my blindness was something that they couldn't accept. And, I guess that's their issue. I don't have to hate them for it, to say just screw you and anybody who looks like you kind of thing. But, to a certain extent, life's tough enough without taking on responsibility for what effectively are other people's issues. And, no matter how positive you are as a blind person, there's going to be a certain number of people that you will encounter who won't be able to handle it.

And, then that reminds me of another social-related thing that, I guess, as blind people and people who might be listening to this that they may have to deal with. Is to a certain extent the frustration that in this world of political correctness and in this world of the ADA; is people may be uncomfortable with you as a blind person, but then some people might say, well, what makes it even more frustrating is that they won't be up front about it. Because if an employer…let's just take an employer, if an employer discriminates against you because you're blind, they may face legal action, and the idea of like a lawsuit or violation of the law with the Americans with Disabilities Act. So, you get that legal variable that if you are being discriminated against, you're not going to know it overtly. And, then when I think about it, both the employer and if you will stay with the dating phenomena, then there's just the purely personal social aspect of feeling uncomfortable about it. I don't think many sighted people would say, well, I wouldn't date somebody because they're blind. That would seem very politically incorrect, and I don't think there's very many

employers that independent of the possibility of being sued; I don't think there's too many people in H.R. who would be comfortable saying, "Oh yes, I'd be willing to deny somebody employment because they're blind or in a wheelchair." It's just what you might call, as if political correctness is public self-consciousness. Then there's also some private self-consciousness, even if nobody else knows about it. I don't know if I'm making sense.

Clarke: Yeah, you are.

Hagemoser: That there's the political correctness; that I have this attitude and I don't want other people to know that I have this attitude, because it might look bad. But, then there's, if you will, sometimes things are politically incorrect to ourselves. And so, I guess that's it. Public self-consciousness, that's more akin to classic political correctness. But, then also in psychology they talk about private self-consciousness, where even if nobody else knows it, I know that I rejected this person because they were blind. That's going to be very uncomfortable to me. And, that reminds me of a study that was done, and to me, this is something that I read about in graduate school. And, to me, I think it's a classic.

What they did was, they had somebody in a wheelchair and they had two different rooms in which there was like a VCR going, a VCR that was like showing a movie. And, what they did is they had the person in the wheelchair in one room and some other chairs in the room along with it. And, the idea is, okay you can watch this movie. And, what they would tell the people who were in the study was that, okay, in this room there is, let's say, a comedy, or in this room

there is a western, and in this room there is a drama, and in this room there is a horror film; something like that. And, what they did is they counter-balanced those films, meaning, that they sort of mixed it up in the show. But, what they found was to me a fascinating thing that really hit on something. What they would find is that people showed a remarkable preference above and beyond what could be accounted for by chance, what if you will, is people suddenly developed an appetite or an appreciation for the type of movie that was in the room where the wheelchair person was not.

So, if you will, if the wheelchair person was in a room that we'll say we're going to watch a comedy, and the empty room was the room where they were showing a western, suddenly people wanted shoot'em up westerns, you know, the John Wayne westerns; that's what I want to watch. Whereas, then later on down-the-road, then with somebody else in a different type of scenario. If the person with the wheelchair was in a room where they were watching a western, and in the empty room had a comedy, then those people, what would you guess?

Clarke: Go to the comedy.

Hagemoser: Yeah. Suddenly, it's like, oh, I could use a good laugh. I could use this type of deal, it's like, you know, I think it's funny. And, were those people mean people? Were they consciously doing that? And, I guess as a psychologist, I'm fascinated. I guess, as a lot of psychologists, how we do things, if you will, the stories that we tell ourselves may not always be, if you will…the stories that we tell ourselves are only part of the picture. Sometimes there may be some

things that are outside our consciousness and what that study showed was again, above and beyond chance, what they were finding was that well people had an interest, suddenly, magically, suddenly developed a lot of interest in the types of movies that were where the wheelchair person was not. And so, you take that and you basically break it down. What, essentially, I think, what the authors concluded, and what I would agree, is that being in that position created them a sense of a kind of discomfort; where at some level, they're uncomfortable with the person in the wheelchair and they may not even be fully consciously aware of that discomfort. But, at some level in the brain, there's sort of like there's a problem here; don't want to sit by the person with the disability. Well, what's one way of solving it. You say it's not the person with the disability that's making me want to go. It's like, well, I want to see this kind of movie. But, that was the deal, is that above and beyond what could be explained by chance is that people just suddenly had this remarkable uncanny preference for whatever the movie was where the wheelchair person wasn't.

And so, that one, I remember when I read that, that was one of those ones that just sort of hit me over the head like a frying pan kind of deal. When I read that back in graduate school, just like a huge neon light bulb went off in my head. It's like, oh my God, that's it. Meaning, that that was sort of like an experimental demonstration of the type of phenomenon that I know I've experienced. And, I'm sure probably many blind people have experienced that kind of frustrating thing, where, you know, there's a problem, but it's not really being framed to you as a problem. So, and I, sorry I have a stream of consciousness; so, to any listener,

pardon me if I'm very disorganized. I have a stream of consciousness that sometimes is an asset, and sometimes is a liability.

Clarke: It's interesting that you talk about them choosing another room. In my own experiences, if I don't want to do something, I always ask myself the question, do I not want to do it because of my blindness? Or do I not want to do it because it's not something that I'm not interested in?

Hagemoser: Yep.

Clarke: And, I think that's very important. What do you think about that?

Hagemoser: Oh, very good. I just had one more thought about the deal, is that what I just said about what you might call attributions. It's like, well, I didn't pick or go into see the western because I'm uncomfortable being around the person with the disability who's watching the comedy. No, no. People wouldn't admit that. They would say, that's what I want is the western. And so, related to employment, I say that this is one of my personal proclamations that, I guess, I have no copyrights to, but hopefully I can get them someday. Is that I will say this, and I throw this out as what I think is a law, is that if a blind person goes in for a job interview and the blindness is never discussed, I have yet to hear somebody say that they were offered a job after that.

And so, what I guess this is my way of saying is that if you go into an interview as a blind person and your blindness isn't discussed, the employer may not feel comfortable bringing it up because they don't know anything

about legal ramifications. If I bring this up, am I setting myself up for a lawsuit? But, what I believe very firmly is that they will find a reason to not hire you. I'm not saying that necessarily as a malicious thing. But, you go back to, if you will, the movie experiment that I just talked about. Well, I'm not sitting with this person because they're in a wheelchair; I just like this certain type of movie. And so, what they probably will do is, well, I'm not declining this blind persons' application because they're blind; it's because well they don't have enough experience in this area. And, I feel quite confident when you think about it, looking over a job resume, there's going to be all kinds of domains of potential knowledge where people could have skills or could have experience. So, if you're a blind person and the person interviewing you has some, is uncomfortable and isn't even aware that they're uncomfortable, they will find a whole in your resume to, if you will, justify the thanks, but no thanks.

And so, I guess that's sort of that parallel along with. I guess that's the job application equivalent to what I was talking about with that. And, remind me, because you had a good question, and I wanted to…Oh, about the doing it as a blind person or do I just not want to do this. This reminds me of, I guess, a parallel of what I do at the VA. I work with veterans who have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. And, one of the things that we talk about is a lot of those guys, when you think about the horrors that they've been through. It's like, I say, they may be uncomfortable being in a shopping mall. And, you think, well, to me that kind of makes sense. It's an unfamiliar environment, a lot of stimulation; based on what they've been through in the past they may be very uncomfortable. So, one of the things we end up talking about with PTSD is similar to what Mary just

brought up with the blindness thing. Okay, you saying that you don't like Wal-marts, is that saying you don't like a Wal-mart because you just don't like a Wal-mart? Or are you saying that you don't like a Wal-mart because you're afraid to be in a Wal-mart?

And, that idea of I don't do this because I don't want to, or I don't do this because I'm afraid to is an extremely gray line, that somebody would argue that that line is so fuzzy that you can't even call it a line. All you can call it is a smudge or a zone or something like that. That line between I'm not going to do it because I don't want to, and I'm not going to do it because I'm afraid to. I'm firmly convinced as human beings that line is just so fuzzy that you really can't tell. And, that's one of the things that we talk about, and I think there's a parallel there.

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Hagemoser: So, what you might say is, am I doing this or not doing this for the "right" reasons or the "wrong" reasons. And, I think as for vets, if you will, if somebody's not going to a Wal-Mart because they're worried that an insurgent may pop out from an isle and start shooting at them, one of the things that we end up talking about is like, okay, how realistic is that? And so, although it's very difficult, so, if you will, a veteran who doesn't go into Wal-mart because he just hates Wal-mart, I mean that's his right. He's more than earned that right not to go to a Wal-mart. But, and that's one thing that we talk about. But, if it's PTSD that's leading him to not go into a Wal-mart, is that kind of robbing him of his freedom? And so, I think there's a parallel with the question that Mary brought up a few minutes ago. Is that, if

you will, not doing something just because you don't want to do it, if you will, that's sort of like if you're declining to do something from a blind person's perspective for the "right" reasons. Whereas, not wanting to do it because you're a blind person, that might be more along the lines of not doing it for the "wrong" reasons. So, it's kind of that parallel there.

And, I guess, I ask myself the same question that Mary was talking about just now. Sometimes I'll ask myself, well, I do or I don't want to do this. If I were sighted, would there be a different thing? I remember talking to a psychologist who was gainfully employed, who, the gentleman happened to be blind. He was a very nice guy, but I remember talking to him and hearing about him. And, my reaction was somewhat sad, because there was some social gathering going on with the psychologists that was going to be out at a restaurant; some type of a party. And, I remember somebody saying, well, probably this gentleman probably won't go because he feels self-conscious in social situations where people are eating and different things. He feels self-conscious. And, I felt at the time, and I still feel, that that's kind of sad. If you will, that as a blind person you're not going out to socialize with your peers or colleagues, you see where I'm coming from; that certainly seemed like not going for the "wrong" reasons. Now, if he basically said, completely independent of my blindness I think everybody I work with is a complete a-hole, then that's something a little bit different. Where you might say the person might need to find another job. But, at least it becomes a blindness irrelevant kind of issue. But, as a blind person, that was kind of sad.

Now that I think about it, that same gentleman, who again was a nice guy, another reason I felt uncomfortable around him, is I remember talking to him and him saying this is great I have my own bathroom. His office had a bathroom immediately attached to it. And, maybe it's a good thing he was blind, because he didn't see my jaw dropping to the floor kind of thing. It's like, what in the bleep are you talking about? You're saying as a blind person that you actually somehow requested having an office that has a bathroom attached to it. And, the idea, you know, I think a lot of people listening would probably be horrified at the idea; oh, my freaking lord, you know, kind of thing. That's for the wrong reasons. If somebody was saying, well jeez, we have these offices, and this is the only one that's available and this office happens to have a bathroom attached to it. And, the hassle trying to go through taking the bathroom out, we just don't have the expenditures for it, so because we have no other choice, congratulations, you have your own bathroom in your office. Well, again, if you will, that would be accepting that for the right reasons. But, I would be very uncomfortable in saying, well, as a blind person, you know, jeez I want an office with my own bathroom.

And, that reminds me of yet another story. I hope anybody who's listening to this; I hope they aren't bored to tears. But, I work at the VA and they were going to...they did give me my own computer because I needed that to load up JAWS and different things like that. Well, one of the things then they were also doing is they came in with a nice laser printer for my own printer. And, in that moment, again, going back to the questions that Mary raised initially; it's like, well, my sighted people, if they want to print something they send it down to the main printer where they would go

to sort of the main clerk's office and they would go get their copies from off the printer. And, I thought at the time, well jeez, that's what I should do. I don't need my own printer as a blind person. I need my own computer because the way the VA is structured, JAWS wouldn't have worked on; what they call, thin clients, these little mini-terminal things. So, if you will, that was relevant to me as a blind person, because, if you will, I needed the accommodation of having my own PC because a thin client wouldn't have worked. But, I felt very strongly, and I think I was accurate, because I don't need my own printer as a blind person. I could still, you know, I can haul my butt to the office to pick up the printouts just as well as any of my sighted colleagues. So, I was very uncomfortable with the idea of getting a printer.

But, then on the flip side of this, going back to the whole social context thing, what we've been talking about is I'm thankful that I finally stopped. Because I was just about on principle about to refuse this laser printer that the tech guys were coming in to setup. And, thank God I pulled my head out of my rear long enough to realize, if I create hassles for these tech guys and I make their lives miserable by refusing something that they've already been instructed to install with all the paperwork and the ink's already dried, and they've already been instructed to do this, I will not have communicated I am a blind person, and see how competent I am. But, I will say, this blind person, what an a-hole. It's like, now we've got to go through all this paperwork to mess around with this, what a jerk, he's created all this hassle. So, I smiled to myself in hindsight, that's again, one of those deals where you realize well you pick your battles. What's the bigger issue? I am blind and here we are, and so I look back on it.

For me to have requested my own printer, I thought then, and I still think now that would have been inappropriate, because I didn't need another printer. But, then the fact that somebody had ordered one for me and it had gone through the system and had been assigned through the slow lurches of the government system, that eventually now this has been designated. And so, these tech guys have been assigned, okay, we are setting up this printer in this office. If I were to have refused that, I would have thrown a wrench into the works, and I basically would have been on the poop list of all the tech guys. And, essentially, I would have, I guess, what would you call that? I would have had the blindness equivalent of pennywise and dollar foolish, meaning, that I would have convinced people of, as far as the tech guys were concerned, is that I was a big fat jerk who is no fun to work with. I wouldn't have won anybody over. So, I guess, now that I think about it, that's to me a funny example.

Clarke: Plus, it might have inconvenienced people if you had sent something to the printer and other people had sent some things to the printer, and to sort it all out.

Hagemoser: Yeah, I guess, that's true. At another level, I would have been crowding the community printer. So, that was another way of looking at it. But, I just kind of laughed because to me that was sort of like wrestling with some of those blindness-related issues. It's like, well, I don't want a printer because I'm a blind person. But, also, if I refuse this because I'm a blind person, then I'm thinking, well, I'm blind, rah, rah, rah, and I'm not going to take any special accommodations. The only thing I would have succeeded in

doing is royally pissing off the guys I'm going to need to help me. Because, if you want to find yourself on a poop list in a bureaucracy, is to cause inconvenience for the people who work there. That's a good way to get yourself on a bad list.

Clarke: I'm curious. Now, when you graduated from your Doctorate degree, and then you applied for jobs, did you have an, or run into, any obstacles when you were applying for jobs after graduation?

Hagemoser: Oh, fortunately, my job experience after I completed my degree actually went remarkably smoothly. As I think about it, my borderline horror stories were all beforehand, because, I guess as I think about it, again, is blindness the variable or is blindness not the variable? Now that I think about it, when I was finishing up my internship, I was having a lot of trouble locating a job independent of anything that I think I could attribute to blindness. Because there just wasn't that many jobs there. And, in psychology, you need a year of post-doctoral supervision in order to be licensed. So, I didn't realize this at the time, but as a Ph.D. without a license, I was squarely in no man's land employment wise, because I was over-qualified for Master's level jobs, and under-qualified for Doctoral level jobs. So, that was already making the job search difficult. The job that I have now I found out about just about the last day of my internship. So, I interviewed for the job about two weeks after my internship ended, and then it was only 15 days between the job interview at the VA Central Iowa and the time when I had a firm offer faxed to me that it was in writing, or if you will, in the bank with signatures and all that

kind of stuff. And, 15 days by federal government standards is a lightning bolt strike. So, I was actually quite lucky.

But, in terms of like, I guess, things relevant to blindness, again is it the blindness or is it not the blindness? I had an experience once where I had an interview for a practicum site back when I lived in Kentucky. And, as part of the interview or part of the conversation, we talked about my blindness and how I would do things differently as a blind person. And, that was the practicum site I wanted. That was the thing that I wanted. And, then I found out later then that they gave it to somebody else. So, then I was presented with, which I'm sure a lot of blind people are presented with, okay why was I not given this, or why did somebody else get it over me. And so, I was thinking, well, was this the blindness issue or was it not? And so, this again has stuck in my mind, because when I did some, I guess informal diggings, I didn't stomp into the guy's office who made the decision and demand to know what the deal was. But, if you will, I did some grapevine exploration in terms of what was going on, and what I found out was that the guy who was offered that practicum not only was a peer of mine, meaning he pretty much had the same education and the same experience. In fact, I worked with him the same summer we were both VA practicum students at the Lexington, Kentucky VA. So, I'm in my program doing what I'm doing, I have a year of graduate school experience and I worked the summertime at the Lexington VA, and he is a year into his Doctoral program and working the summertime at the VA. And, I met him. He was a nice guy, he was a smart guy. And, he had applied there a year earlier and they were unable to fund him. So, when you start thinking about this, now I think about it, is it possible that it was

discrimination against blindness? I guess you could say it's possible.

But, as I'm telling this, and I mean you're probably realizing is that the evidence starts pointing in the other direction. Here he is, he has the totally comparable experience, almost like reading it off a chart. Our resumes would have been, for all practical purposes identical, both a year of Doctoral training under our belt, and the summer interning at the VA. And, he had applied last year and they couldn't fund him last year. So, based on the information available, it was like he should have gotten that position. I mean, just in terms of basic types of fairness, if the situation had been reversed. You know where I'm coming from. It just makes sense that he got it. So, that was one of those situations where I applied for something, we talked about my blindness, and I didn't get the job.

And, I think somewhat reasonably considered, is it possible I was discriminated against? But, I guess, I'm very glad I didn't fly into a rage about it. Because would I have made an ass of myself if I would have done that, because when I got the information back, all of the "evidence" that was at my disposal was that it was a totally legitimate and fair decision that blindness really had nothing to do with it. And, I suppose that's one of the many frustrations for us as blind people. And, an added stressor is that we have to ask and try to answer that question, and sighted people just don't have to.

Clarke: Right.

Hagemoser: So, sometimes it may be the blindness, and other times it may not be the blindness. But, I guess, that

idea of having, you know, in addition to all the hassles of blindness just in terms of being able to negotiate your environment, you get that whole social layer of the idea that, you know, you encounter all these types of situations where you know it's a variable. And, then you're forced to kind of deduce, okay, what has this person told me? What has this person not told me? What evidence do I have, and we're left with? And so, that was one situation where, if you will, I felt the evidence pretty clearly pointed, if you will, that this was legit rather than blindness discrimination. But, there's going to be so many cases in life where that will not be clear and if you don't have proof, then what can you do? You can't just go around slinging mud, even if your gut really tells you strongly that it was the blindness thing. And, it may, in reality, it may actually be it. But, the difference between, you know, what is "reality" in an interpersonal sense, and what you can prove in a court of law, I think everybody would agree is completely night and day. You would need a lot, I don't know, I think you'd need pretty clear-cut, pretty overwhelming evidence to win a discrimination case.

1:15:00

Hagemoser: Because, like I said a few minutes ago, is that if somebody is uncomfortable around you, an employer, even if it's not your fault; if you're a blind person and your employer feels the heebie-jeebies in your presence, they will find a hole in your resume to justify not hiring you. And, that goes back to I guess one of my big deals. Is that if an employer is uncomfortable in your presence, then they will find a reason to not hire you, and it probably won't be

blindness, even though I might say, deep down maybe it is, but certainly that won't be their story.

Clarke: Right. I just have one other question, and then if there is anything else you want to add. I understand that in your social life you play guitar. And, can you tell me a little bit about that?

Hagemoser: Oh, okay. I play drums, guitar and bass. And, we've got a new band with two dudes and two ladies in the band, a female drummer, which is a nice novelty; she's a good drummer. I'm trying to think about blindness related stuff, but I guess I learned guitar differently. There's so many DVD's out there on how to play guitar. They're very visual, and so I bought one of those once and very quickly after a series of do-dee-do. Why did I do this kind of deal, and it was very frustrating, because what they were showing was the hand of the guitar player. And, I found, I guess, like so many things, the Department says it's not so much…I guess, one nice thing about the Department is I think, the biggest thing the Department gave for me, and I think it's happened for a lot of people is a fancy-schmancy term, is an expectancy for success. Before I went to the Department I thought can I succeed as a blind person. After the Department I think it's one of the greatest things. It's sort of like can you succeed as a given, and the question then is, how? Sort of like, if you will, rather than can I, the question is well how will I? So, the if's turn into how's.

So, along those lines, well, okay that's an obstacle. Sighted people learn how to play guitar usually through reading music visually or looking at a DVD. But, then I found what is called guitar by ear, which essentially is just an

audio version where they teach you how to play guitar purely on CD. So, it's just verbally, string, finger, fret, different things like that. And so, that's how I learned to play. And now, if I said well jeez, I can't learn an instrument because of blah, blah blindness; it's ridiculous. You're supposed to play guitar by feel anyway. And, if I want to learn something I have the wherewithal that I can learn it and usually find a format.

One slightly humorous thing about blindness and being a musician is my eyesight's getting bad enough where, every now and then, I lose track of the microphone. So, if I'm playing my guitar and I step away from the microphone, I'm going to have to come up with a new alternative blindness technique about that, so that I don't completely lose my microphone when performing live; because I don't want to just stand in one place. That's fun and a good way to socialize and meet different people.

I think, and this is just my opinion, I think socializing is a relative challenge for blind people, one with social stigma, and secondly just the access. If you're sighted people, you have a car and you can just go where you want to piece-by-piece, but as blind people, well, it doesn't make it impossible, but it does make it more of a challenge to be able to get from point B to point B. I'm sorry, point A to point B when you walk. So, it certainly does create a few challenges.

Clarke: Is there anything else you want to add to this or?

Hagemoser: Well, I've yammered for quite a bit and I appreciate you letting me. Like I said, I've a very stream of consciousness organization of thinking. But, I think, I guess,

I want to thank you Mary, because one of the things that I wanted to do is I realize, I've a lot of ideas and concepts in terms of what I might be able to contribute. I think being a blind person and a psychologist, although in some ways you think, oh God, screwed up in two ways. I mean, screwed up squared. But, in some ways I think one of the things it's actually been very good, and I think it's a relative strength, and I think it's something that I try to share with other people, as I think as a blind person and as a psychologist; it has given me an opportunity to, I guess, fuse some things and start to see some connections that maybe, you know, that give me life experiences that maybe that will help.

So, I guess, maybe one last thing is this visual imagine, how's that for kinky visual imagery for blind people or something like that. But, if you find yourself at a job interview with a sighted person, I feel dollars to donuts that person is going to be uncomfortable to a greater or lesser extent; probably is going to be uncomfortable with you in the blindness thing. It doesn't make him a bad person, but it's just going to be unfamiliar. So, one potential advantage that we have as blind people is that surprise intensifies people's emotional reactions. So, put it this way, if you went in to meet somebody and people had told you that they thought this person was a great guy, and then you meet him and you think, you find out he's a schmuck. You're going to doubly dislike him because you were unpleasantly surprised, I guess; first of all Mary, does that make sense?

Clarke: Yes, I see where you're coming from.

Hagemoser: I guess, you're my barometer to see if the listener will be able to make heads or tails of what I'm trying

to say. And, also then, on the flip side of that, is if you went into something kind of dreading it because somebody had told you that so-and-so is a real schmuck. And, then you meet that person and you find out, hey this person, I like this person. You doubly like that person because you were pleasantly surprised.

So, with that, although that creates some potential obstacles for the blind person, at least potentially it gives you an advantage. Because I've gotten some feedback in my life on this that some people have said after I interview with them or after I've talked with them. They've said, well, I have to admit when you came here we were a little bit nervous, thinking how are we going to accommodate this person as a blind person? But, their heart was in the right place and they were saying they wanted to try to help. And, they said, we were thinking, it's like, how are we going to make you feel comfortable and being worried about it, and then you came in here and made us more comfortable.

And, I've gotten feedback that people have been appreciative, if you will, to go back to that language that I was able to pickup some converts, in terms of having more positive emotional reactions or positive attitudes about blind people; because they went in dreading…and maybe that's being overly dramatic, but, I guess, with some anxiety about meeting a blind person. And, I went in there and tried to do as much as I could to try to make them feel comfortable. So, if you want the visual image, feel free to use this; that if you're interviewing for a job and think of it as crossing a rickety bridge. Now, you know this bridge is solid, and, you know this is a good bridge; it's a solid bridge; it just looks a little rickety. Because when you first encountered it, you thought it was kind of rickety, too. It

made you nervous, but eventually you got your courage and you were able to cross it. And, then you crossed it back and forth, crossed it back and forth, and now you know the bridge is solid. So, you're comfortable with it.

So, when you're interviewing somebody with a job application, as far as the blindness goes, that person is going to be like the person who thinks, oh man, that makes me nervous, that makes me uncomfortable, that looks like a really rickety bridge. But, you know better. So, the idea is that you comfort that person, and you take them by the hand. And, once you've crossed the bridge, then they're probably very grateful and appreciative for that. And so, using that type of deal…So, even though, I guess, the potential anxiety that employers, and, I guess, other people may have around us; although you could say that's not fair, that's BS, dah-ta-dah-ta-dah.

You could also say, from what I've just mentioned, you could say, well, to a certain extent that's energy that you might be able to harness for your benefit. Meaning if they're uncomfortable around you, they're expecting to be uncomfortable around you and you pleasantly surprise them. You might say that you've doubly won them over. You could say, yeah, trying to change negative associations into positive associations. That's yet another tool in the toolbox.

Clarke: Yes. It can be an enjoyable challenge, too.

Hagemoser: Yeah, I guess when you mention that, I agree totally. Is that's one of the ways, I guess, in general that I look at, I guess, cope with being blind is that it's an education and it's an opportunity; and these are just other challenges that, to a certain extent, winning over new

people is just something that, I guess, is part of what you do. And, I've heard some blind people say, and I chuckle and I agree with this, sometimes when you have really, really bad days, you don't feel like you want to win anybody over; you just wish people would leave you alone. And, that's human beings. That reminds me of just one more thing I'd like to share.

I used to think that blindness was the cause of misery or the cause of a bad day. One of the things I've learned is that blindness still can be associated with a bad day, but I've learned that it's kind of, if you will, of having a bad day with blindness is more of a symptom of a bad day than a cause of a bad day. And, I use this example. In blindness, like it or not, we have to deal with detours. I like that analogy, because the sighted people they just drive on down the road. But, you know, blind people, maybe I shouldn't use blind people driving, I guess, any listener disregard that idea. But, a detour on a walking path how about that? Okay; that we encounter detours. So, think about it. If you're having a pretty good, I mean a good day; if you encounter a detour, you might not be upset about it, you might even be positive about it. Well, jeez, okay. Well, maybe I'll take this walking path. In fact, maybe I'll walk by this CD place and I'll by myself a new CD. You know, you can actually make an adventure out of it, the detour.

Okay, if you're having an average day, you might go detour, grumble, grumble, and then kind of go on about your business. But, if you just had the worst day of your life, and you encounter a detour, you're going to be "what the bip, another bip, why does the bip always have to bip me, you know; bleeping out every other word, snapping at everybody and snarling. And so, I realize, gee, I like that as sort of a

blindness, and the rest of your life; because in that case, the detour isn't causing your misery. But, if you're already miserable for a number of factors that have nothing to do with blindness, and then you encounter a blindness-related obstacle, when you've already had a bad day because of family, work, stress, you know, you name it.

And so, I kind of chuckle because to me, that image or that analogy helps, because some day I do get down because I am blind. And, maybe that will always happen. But, when I think about in that detour type of thing, usually I go back to and think, okay, that does make sense. It's not so much the blindness thing, but rather I hit this blindness obstacle; this detour when I was already really having a pretty crappy day or week based on other things. So, it's just starting to realize that, if you will, the blindness is not so much the cause of being bummed. But, if you will, it's just another symptom of a bad day.

And, I remember talking to my dad once, and I think he said, I think it's safe to say, everybody gets down because life throws them some things. But, I appreciate his straight forwardness that as a blind person you're just going to have to go, and somehow find a way to come to accept; that you'll just have one more thing to maybe be down about. And so, it's one of those deals. Everybody gets down about relationships, or, well, the family isn't going well. Or certainly with what's been going on in Japan and all that deal. Life presents some bad things, and blindness, I guess, just adds another layer; but it's not an insurmountable layer.

Clarke: Good. Well, Steve, I have totally enjoyed this.

Hagemoser: Well, thanks.

Clarke: This interview.

Hagemoser: I've very much enjoyed the help. Thank you for asking good questions, which, be careful what you wish for. You made me think of new things. So, be careful what you wish for. Your questions jarred other thoughts and stuff.

Clarke: This has been very, very informative.

Hagemoser: Well, thank you.

Clarke: Thank you.

1:28:07
(End of Recording)

Jo Ann Slayton
5/30/2011